Section IX: Early Modern Europe, 1500-1789   Contemporary Civilization (Ideas and Institutions of Western Man)

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1. The Absolute Dynastic State

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Abstract
One of the most significant developments of the early modern period was the evolution of the national state from its beginnings in the feudal monarchy of the High and Late Middle Ages. The ghost of a universal state coincident with a universal church, which had lingered to the end of the Middle Ages, was finally laid to rest with the successful disruption of Christendom and recognition of the sovereignty of the national state. In its place there was a frank acceptance of the political fragmentation of Europe along the geographical lines which were already clearly discernible, at least in western Europe, by 1500. [*excerpt*]

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Contemporary Civilization, European History, Absolutism, Sovereign State

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Comments
This is a part of Section IX: Early Modern Europe, 1500-1789. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man,* as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems.* A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man,* was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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1. The Absolute Dynastic State

One of the most significant developments of the early modern period was the evolution of the national state from its beginnings in the feudal monarchy of the High and Late Middle Ages. The ghost of a universal state coincident with a universal church, which had lingered to the end of the Middle Ages, was finally laid to rest with the successful disruption of Christendom and recognition of the sovereignty of the national state. In its place there was a frank acceptance of the political fragmentation of Europe along the geographical lines which were already clearly discernible, at least in western Europe, by 1500.

The Protestant movement helped bring to a decision the long-brewing controversy between the universal church and the

The standard state was a dynastic state. (dynasty) Inability of feudalism to keep order evolved into the absolute Dynastic state. State & Protestant Church often worked together. Sometimes a state church. totalitarian state - states try to control all

national state, with the state emerging as the ultimate victor.
Particularly after the religious wars, it became evident that a
united Christendom would not be restored. When it became obvi-
ous that Catholics and Protestants were not going to fight on
until they had eliminated each other, and that they would have
to learn to live together, some of the loyalty hitherto reserved
for the church was transferred to the state. With but few ex-
ceptions, this loyalty came to rest in the person of the hered-
itary monarch, who alone seemed able to provide the discipline
and order which the times demanded.

The term "New Monarchy" has been used to describe the type
of government which was developed in the late fifteenth century
by such rulers as Louis XI of France (1461-1483), Ferdinand of
Spain (1479-1516), and Henry VII of England (1485-1509), and
which was continued during the next century and a half by their
successors. Since the patriotic feeling engendered by the use
of common language and customs, or perhaps only by sharing com-
mon tribulations, did not yet focus upon an abstraction such as
the state, most men made little or no distinction between the
king and the state. This fact undoubtedly helped the monarch
to weaken or eliminate the hold of many old competing jurisdic-
tions within his realm, whether those of the manor, guild, or
monastery. In their place the king tried to establish one law,
one guardian or order, one army, one mint, and one power to tax.
Success in this ambitious endeavor was long in coming and was
often incomplete, but the bureaucracy which the king inherited
or developed in this effort to effect his will throughout the
realm was perhaps the greatest tangible achievement of the New
Monarchy.

In the search for order in the early modern world, men re-
jected one after another of the alternatives to strong monarchy.
By 1500 the parliamentary institutions which had appeared in
virtually every feudal state in the Late Middle Ages were on
the decline. They had never attempted to replace the monarch
as the effective instrument of government, nor did they display
much promise in their efforts to share power with him. The in-
dependent political power of the nobility was being eclipsed by
the crown. Many noblemen perished in battle, and those who re-
mained often were bought off with valuable privileges. Fortun-
ate indeed was the state which was able to use the talents of
the nobility to implement the policies laid down by the royal
government. Finally, the vast and sprawling power of the Church
no longer posed the threat to the national monarchy that it once
had. In states that remained Roman Catholic, agreements with
the pope gave the kings a relatively free hand over religious
affairs in their realms. In states that became Protestant, the
usual arrangement was the territorial church, which customarily
gave the monarch an even freer hand in controlling what was
still a powerful institution.

The king continued to find his strongest and most dependable
support in the middle class. The liquid wealth which it pos-
sessed was an indispensable factor in maintaining royal govern-
ment. The order which that government provided was such a

*Absolutist not totalitarian. (didn't have the machinery) More's Utopia
absolutist in areas where they chose to act. Institutions which More thought give trouble
were brought to heel.*

decided improvement upon feudal confusion that the bourgeoisie not only supported it with their loyalty and money, but also staffed it with some of their best talent. In fact, the middle class regarded royal law and order with such esteem that it was long content to acquiesce in the destruction of the many substantial limitations with which both theory and practice had hedged medieval monarchy.

The idea that political authority is sacred was of long standing. The medieval world accepted as a truism that all earthly power, whether spiritual or temporal, comes from above. Not even Marsiglio would have denied that God was the ultimate source of the political authority which he said was vested in the people. The medieval world also accepted the belief that all political power, by whomsoever exercised, was limited by the law of nature and of God. It followed that men had the right, if not the duty, to resist a tyrannical or a heretical ruler. There is no better example of this than that provided by Magna Carta, an attempt to force the king to rule under the law.

These beliefs underwent a modification in the early modern period when, in response to the need for ending civil and religious strife, the theory of the divine right of kings first appeared. There were a number of able writers who expounded this theory, but none of them was more conversant with the actual political problems of his day than King James VI of Scotland (1567-1625). He succeeded to the throne at the age of one when his mother, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, was forced to abdicate. James grew to manhood during a period of civil and religious warfare in Scotland, a fact which undoubtedly helped to fix his political ideas. Five years before succeeding Elizabeth on the throne of England (as James I), he published anonymously The True Law of Free Monarchies (1598).

After asserting that "there is not a thing so necessary to be known by the people of any land, next the knowledge of their God, as the right knowledge of their allegiance," James set down "the true grounds of the mutual duty and allegiance betwixt a free [that is, free of worldly control] and absolute monarch, and his people."[1] He found these "true grounds" in three places: the Scriptures, the fundamental laws of Scotland, and the law of nature. From the Scriptures he drew texts to prove that "monarchy is the true pattern of divinity" and that kings "sit upon God's throne in the earth" in the role of God's lieutenants. From the laws of Scotland he concluded that kings had established the state and promulgated its laws. This was sufficient proof for him that "the king is above the law, as both the author and giver of strength thereto" and, indeed, that he is

1 - This and other quotations from The True Law of Free Monarchies (with spelling modernized) are taken from The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, James, By the Grace of God, King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland... (London, 1616), pp. 193-210.

King is free in a free monarchy. Divine right of kings.

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the "overlord of the whole land...master over every person that inhabits the same, having power over the life and death of every one of them." Finally, from the law of nature James drew two illustrations. (He compared the king, first, to the father who cares for his children and who in return expects their unqualified obedience and, second, to the single head which controls the body and without which the body is useless.)

James denied the existence of any right on the part of subjects to rebel, even against the most tyrannical ruler. His rejection of such a right followed from the belief that kings were appointed by God to rule over men "as our God in earth, and loving Father." Disobedience to kings therefore was a sin. The only responsibility they have is responsibility to God, which James thought awesome enough: *People may rebel, ∴ God sent a bad king.*

> the further a king is preferred by God above all other ranks and degrees of men, and the higher that his seat is above theirs, the greater is his obligation to his maker. And therefore in case he forget himself...the sadder and sharper will his correction be; and according to the greatness of the height he is in, the weight of his fall will recompense the same.... By remitting to the justice and providence of God to stir up such scourges as pleases him, for punishment of wicked kings...my only purpose and intention in this treatise is to persuade...all such good Christian readers, as bear not only the naked name of a Christian, but kithe the fruits thereof in their daily form of life, to keep their hearts and hands free from such monstrous and unnatural rebellions, whensoever the wickedness of a prince shall procure the same at God's hands....

(One of the appeals of the theory of divine right was that it placed the ruler beyond the arena of religious and civil strife where he could command the respect, or at least the passive obedience, alike of noble and commoner, rich and poor, Protestant and Catholic.) This theory rested on faith and emotion with few rational underpinnings, and it was soon abandoned by political thinkers. But in such places as France and Russia its acceptance among the lower classes (and the rulers) continued well into modern times.

The theory of divine right lost much of its currency when political arguments were no longer couched in specifically religious terms and backed by reference to Scripture. Another and different political idea which took on its modern form about the same time and which has persisted is the theory of sovereignty, associated with the name of the Frenchman, Jean Bodin (1530-1596).

Bodin's views were formed in the same crucible as the theory of divine right. During much of the latter half of his lifetime there was weak monarchy and religious warfare in France, similar to that in Scotland. Bodin, a lawyer, was associated with a

Hamstring the parliaments, etc. People prepared to sacrifice these to get order.

group of French thinkers known as the Politiques, who at length concluded that the restoration of peace and order in the kingdom could only be accomplished by strengthening the French monarchy at the expense of other elements in the state. In the Six Books on the Republic (1576), sometimes translated as the Six Books on the State, Bodin went beyond the immediate situation in France to discuss the conception of political authority which he believed would be conducive to a "well-ordered state."

The idea of sovereignty was not original with Bodin, but can be traced through medieval writers back to the Greeks and Romans. What Bodin did was to revive it and begin casting it into its modern form. A student of Aristotle, he found the origins of the state in the natural needs of man. He concluded that the state was the creation of a group of families, often brought together by force, the heads of which grant "supreme and perpetual" power to some person or group of persons. This supreme and perpetual power he designated sovereignty and defined it as "supreme power over citizens and subjects, unrestrained by laws." That person (or group) possesses it, he wrote, "who after God acknowledges no one greater than himself." Bodin believed that sovereignty was by its very nature indivisible and therefore could not be shared. It would have to reside ultimately in the king, the aristocracy, or the whole people. If sovereignty is vested in the people, they must designate those who carry out the powers and duties associated with it. Bodin was convinced that the only well-ordered state was one in which sovereign power was vested in the king. (preferred this)

The chief attribute of sovereignty, wrote Bodin, was giving laws. From this legislative power flowed the other responsibilities of statecraft, such as maintaining order or making war. He insisted that the power, wherever it resides, must be unlimited by man and must command universal obedience, above the claims of church, guild, or parliament. This is not to say that in a well-ordered state there can be no parliamentary institutions. Bodin admitted that they may indeed have their place in assisting the king in the process of legislation, but it must be as distinct inferiors to the monarch.

When the king was sovereign, Bodin agreed with James VI that the ruler was above the laws and, therefore, not bound to obey them. He was responsible solely to the laws of nature and of God. Bodin regarded these as fundamental limitations on sovereign power, though not human in character. It was precisely at this point that he criticized Machiavelli for failing to recognize that such qualities as justice and good faith are demanded of rulers by God and that they must not be abandoned for the prospect of immediate gain.

It is true that Bodin never makes quite clear what final purposes the sovereign state is expected to serve that would justify the degree of obedience which he exacts of the citizen. Surely it did not exist to promote the good life, as for Aristotle. Perhaps for Bodin it is enough that the state provides

king (or group) has no law over him. Only thing over the sovereign power is God & the laws of nature

order. Again, it is true that he sets up a precarious rela-
tionship between the family and the all-powerful state by deny-
ing the latter the right to interfere with private property, an
institution which Bodin prized highly and which he placed under
family control. However, these inconsistencies in his theory
need not detract from his perspicacity in observing that times
were changing in sixteenth century Europe. He saw that the
supreme and perpetual power that had been so thoroughly diffused
during the Middle Ages as to be unrecognizable was now being
concentrated in the state and, above all, in the prince. Within
the national state the monarch vowed to tolerate no opposition.
Outside it he vowed to bow to no human being.

Sovereignty is one of the key political concepts of contem-
porary Western Civilization. It provides a philosophic basis
for the state system which for more than four centuries has
been characteristic in the West. Ever since the Peace of West-
phalia (1648) which ended the Thirty Years' War, diplomats have
acted on the assumption that they represent political units
which, however large or small, are separate and legally equal
entities, subject to no external human authority or allegiance,
with the undisputed right to maintain armies and navies, carry
on war, make peace, manage their own foreign affairs, and regu-
late their domestic affairs without interference from outside
or without opposition to the laws from within. Political think-
ers since Bodin have been much more successful in their efforts
to transfer the locus of sovereignty from the absolute monarch
to the whole people than they have been in transferring it from
the national state to some more inclusive political institution.

With the national state the ultimate in political develop-
ment, subject to no transcending or limiting authority, there
was ample room for anarchy in the relations that necessarily
must exist among states. To modify this anarchy the Western
World took over from the Italian city-states certain practices
which it developed into the techniques of modern diplomacy.
During the last half of the fifteenth century the Italian cities
began the practice of sending regular representatives to each
other's courts. Since these cities were usually bitter rivals,
close enough to attack each other easily, it was vitally neces-
sary that they obtain information on which each could base its
estimate of the others and plan its actions accordingly. By
the time the other European states adopted the procedures which
the Italians had developed, they were engaged in a similar ri-
valry and needed similar information.

Diplomats began moving about according to an elaborate
body of protocol and ceremony. They were expected to represent
the best interests of their state at all times, a fact which
may have given rise to the definition that they were good men
sent abroad to lie for their country. The successful perform-
ance of their mission demanded constant attendance at the court
to which they were accredited. Only in this way could they keep
abreast of what was happening or strike a favorable bargain at
what seemed to be the most propitious moment. The letters which

they regularly sent home to their governments were by far the best source of information the latter had concerning the personalities of foreign rulers and the policies which they were pursuing. The diplomat has often been criticized, but his craft was, and still is, an indispensable one in a world of sovereign national states, where orderly relations are on an essentially voluntary basis.

The idea that the national state is sovereign has thus far effectively precluded the development of a law whose purpose is to eliminate international violence in the way that domestic law ordinarily eliminates violence within the state. Nevertheless, this has not prevented states, acting in what they regard as their own interests, from generally following a body of usages in the conduct of their relations with each other. We call these usages the law of nations, or international law. They derive chiefly from long-established customs, which under normal circumstances are observed without question, and from formal agreements entered into by two or more states. For example, it was primarily mutual convenience which became force of habit that led states to accord certain privileges to foreign diplomats, while it was by the Peace of Westphalia that the powers of Europe agreed to recognize Switzerland and the Netherlands as sovereign states.

One of the first men to explore the bases on which a system of international law must rest was a Dutch lawyer, statesman, and theologian, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). His greatest work, The Law of War and Peace (1625), helped win for him the title of father of international law. Accepting the national state as an accomplished fact, Grotius refused to believe that thereby the world was condemned to perpetual anarchy. Drawing upon Greek and Roman ideas of natural law, he declared that God had formed all men into one species and had given them language and other ways to communicate with each other. Moreover, he had given them all the faculty of reason, which enables them to discover the principles which should govern the relations between states. While admitting that there was no supersovereign who could suppress international disorder, Grotius believed there were nevertheless definite sanctions operative upon statesmen and diplomats which would tend to prevent them from ignoring the law of nature. One of these sanctions was the force of public opinion, another was conscience, and a third was God. In this way Grotius dealt with a serious shortcoming of the modern state: its ultimate irresponsibility when dealing with others of its kind.

Balance of power.